



Action for Warm Homes



The Food Foundation and National Energy Action (NEA) Joint Briefing:

IMPACTS OF FOOD INSECURITY AND FUEL POVERTY ON CHILD HEALTH THIS WINTER

The Food Foundation and National Energy Action (NEA) have developed this short joint briefing because of our shared extreme concern that the cost of living and energy crises are harming children's development. Without further intervention to boost household incomes and further support households to live in a warm, safe home with enough nutritious food to eat, we believe that millions of children will be put in danger this winter and beyond.

September 2022

Who are we?

[The Food Foundation](#)'s mission is to change food policy and business practice to ensure everyone, across the UK, can afford and access a healthy diet, supplied by a sustainable food system. The Food Foundation works with others who believe there is a problem with the system and want to change it, and is independent of all political parties and business. [NEA](#) works to ensure that everyone in the UK can afford to live in a warm, safe home. NEA works collaboratively with many national and local organisations who are at the forefront of the current energy crisis.

Why is children's health at risk this winter?

As the cost of living crisis worsens, many more households are struggling to heat and power their homes and put a warm, nutritious meal on the table. There is a growing body of evidence that indicates that, despite parents doing everything they can to protect them from food insecurity and fuel poverty, both issues are having immediate and ongoing impacts on children's physical and mental health.

What are the impacts of food insecurity and fuel poverty on children and parents?

- **Babies** living in colder temperatures require more calories for growth and, without this additional nourishment, they are more likely to have lower than average weight gain and dietary deficiency as young children.¹
- **Children** living in households experiencing food insecurity and fuel poverty have higher rates of asthma,² as well as other severe respiratory problems.³ Children who are unable to access a healthy diet also have an increased risk of obesity⁴ or medical issues like headaches, stomachaches and backaches,⁵ as well as having difficulties sleeping. Children growing up hungry are also twice as likely to be anxious compared to their peers who get enough to eat.⁶
- **Adolescents** growing up cold and hungry face stigmatisation, social isolation, and feelings of helplessness, which can negatively impact on educational attainment and social mobility.⁷ Teenagers that are going hungry and live in a cold home are more likely to suffer severe depression or attempt suicide.⁸
- **Lone parent households and households where the age of the youngest member is under 5** are at the highest risk of experiencing fuel poverty.⁹ Households where the age of the youngest member is 11-15 live in the deepest fuel poverty.¹⁰
- **Parents** living in fuel poverty are much more likely to develop depression compared to parents who live in a warm home.¹¹ Adults who are trying to cope with food insecurity and economic hardship may be extremely stressed, this can affect the way they interact with and are able to care for their children.¹²

This unacceptable situation is entirely preventable. As was recently highlighted in a report by the University College London Institute of Health Equity,¹³ infants living in low-income and food-insecure families who receive fuel subsidies have better carer-reported development, higher weight-for-age scores and are less likely to attend emergency paediatric services compared with those not receiving subsidies. Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology at University College London and Past President of the World Medical Association, has described the situation as a potential 'humanitarian crisis' with the life chances of children potentially being 'blighted'.¹⁴

In spite of the measures announced by the UK Government on the 8th of September, those whose lives and budgets have already been seriously compromised by inflation reaching its highest point in 40 years and successive energy price cap rises will require deeper, targeted support.

Overall, despite the freeze on bills and the ongoing commitment to the £400 rebate, average energy bills will have almost doubled from the start of October since this time last year (end

of September 2021). Based on the 10% measurement of fuel poverty, we estimate that **6.7 million households across the UK will still be trapped in fuel poverty this winter**, including well over a million households with a child under five. In addition, to date the UK Government has not taken enough action to boost the level of assistance provided by the welfare system, given the soaring level of inflation.

5 urgent actions are needed by the UK Government:

- Boost incomes by increasing Universal Credit and other legacy benefits in line with inflation
- Introduce a new social tariff to lower the cost of energy bills for low income households
- Reduce needless energy consumption by enhancing investment in domestic energy efficiency
- The Healthy Start scheme should be urgently expanded and strengthened
- All children living in households receiving Universal Credit should receive Free School Meals

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Notes

The Food Foundation defines food insecurity (sometimes referred to as food poverty) as the state of being without reliable access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food. In 2000, UK-wide legislation first defined a person living in fuel poverty as “a member of a household living on a lower income in a home which cannot be kept warm at reasonable cost”. Whilst an understanding of fuel poverty is still broadly consistent across the four nations of the UK, it is now measured in different ways in some UK nations. NEA bases its projections on the 10% of a household's income as the definition of fuel poverty as it gives a realistic picture of the scale of fuel poverty in periods of more volatile energy prices. For more information visit: <https://www.nea.org.uk/energy-crisis/>.

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